British Express Train Services in 1898

The Southern Lines

By GERVASE HUGHES, M.A.

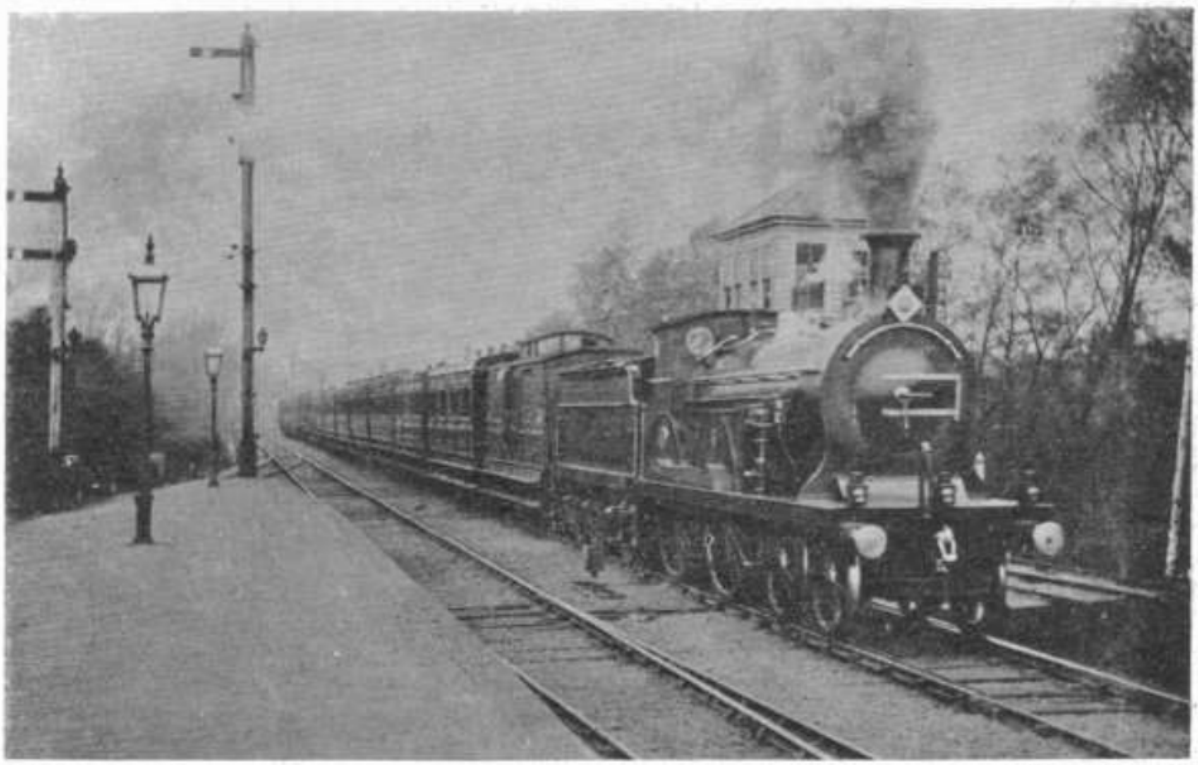

Photo courtesy] [*Rixon Bucknall*

Down Dover boat train passing Chislehurst at the turn of the century, with one of the 4-4-0s built for the South Eastern Railway in 1898 to the designs of James Stirling shortly before his retirement

DURING the twentieth century the pattern of public transport in Great Britain has been transformed by increasing use of the internal combustion engine as a means of swift travel by road, and to a lesser extent by air. Railways, taken alone, have undergone *gradual* evolution; electricity has finally established itself as the most satisfactory method of propulsion for short-distance traffic in densely-populated urban areas, but it will be some time yet before *all* trains are worked by electric or diesel power. In analysing express services at the heyday of steam monopoly, before the advent of the motor-car or the first railway electrification, it is not my intention to take sides, let alone evoke nostalgia for the past. I merely propose to review, as comprehensively as possible within set limits of conciseness, the facilities provided some sixty years ago for long-distance travellers—as distinct from suburban commuters or patient country-folk who occasionally visited the nearest market-town.

I have chosen 1898 for the purpose because no "new look" had, as yet, been given to the midlands and west country by the Great Central extension to London (completed in 1899) and the modernisation programme undertaken by the Great Western during the next ten years or so. On that account there will be an occasional touch of antiquarian interest, and when considering the service offered by the Midland Railway between London, Leicester and Nottingham, the London & North Western Railway between London and Birmingham, the London & South Western Railway between London and Weymouth or Exeter, it will be important to bear in mind that in 1898 Great Central competition was non-existent and Great

Western competition less of a spur than it shortly afterwards became. The conveyance of passengers from A to B in, say, 2 hr. 45 min. rather than 3 hr. (possibly with consequent inconvenience for passengers from A to C or D to B) is not the sole criterion of overall efficiency, and each main line or section of main line will be treated strictly on its merits. None-the-less, commercial rivalry had its effect, and it will not be possible to disregard that facet altogether.

Taking London as focal point and working clockwise round the map from the Thames estuary, the first railway system we come to is that compact little concern the London, Chatham & Dover, comprising a straightforward main line from London to Dover, and three important branches—Swanley to Maidstone (now Maidstone East) and Ashford, Sittingbourne to Queenborough and Sheerness, and Faversham to Margate and Ramsgate. Nearly all the expresses were based on Victoria, calling at Herne Hill for the City connection, but a few ran direct to or from Holborn Viaduct. The Ashford and Sheerness lines need not detain us long. On the former one train alone in each direction could possibly justify the designation of express—the 8.40 a.m. from Ashford and the 4.12 p.m. from Victoria. Even these called at all stations beyond Maidstone (conditionally in some cases) and took a full two hours for the 62 miles, including reversal at Sevenoaks Bat & Ball.

The Sheerness branch comes into the picture through the morning and evening Flushing mail trains between Victoria and Queenborough Pier. The fastest time for the 50¼ miles was 72 min. by the 8.30 a.m. down; this called only at Herne Hill but slipped a portion at Chatham which worked forward as a stopping train to Faversham—with another continental express, the 9 a.m. Victoria to Dover, close on its heels. The latter was a triple-purpose train, for at Faversham it slipped two portions, one for Canterbury (now Canterbury East) and stations to Dover, the other for stations to Margate and Ramsgate. On Mondays and Saturdays in the summer, a relief at 9.2 a.m. from Victoria ran by at Faversham and reached Margate at 10.53, and Ramsgate at 11.10, but most of the Kent Coast services were more leisurely; of those that ran each weekday only two down and three up brought Margate (74 miles) within less than two hours of London. The fastest by a long way was the down City express at 5.10 p.m. from Holborn Viaduct, which ran non-stop from St. Pauls (now Blackfriars) to Margate in 93 min. and was due Ramsgate at 7 p.m. This, too, slipped portions at Faversham, one for stations to Westgate-on-Sea (7.1), the other for stations to Dover (7.25).

Dover itself benefited considerably from the Calais and Ostend boat trains, six down and five up, which were then available for local passengers. Some made intermediate stops; indeed the Ostend train leaving Dover Harbour at 9.25 a.m. called at Dover Priory, Kearnsey, Canterbury, Faversham, Sittingbourne, New Brompton (now Gillingham), Chatham, Rochester, Rochester Bridge (no longer in existence) and Herne Hill, reaching Victoria at 11.45. But that was exceptional, and the best time for the 78½ miles between Victoria and Dover Pier was 105 min.; the 9.55 p.m. up achieved it despite three stops—and incidentally played its part in the provision of a day service from Lucerne to London in 16½ hours. Leaving aside the boat trains, the best times between London and Dover Priory were 122 min. down, with four stops and 139 min. up with eight. Walmer and Deal were provided with through coaches *via* Kearnsey, and on summer Sundays had a train all to themselves at 9.2 a.m. from Victoria, taking 139 min. for the 84¼ miles to Deal with four stops; it returned at 6 p.m. and was due in Victoria at 8.30.

Although the cross-Channel steamers plying from Dover were owned by the L.C.D.R., the South Eastern, too, ran boat trains in connection. As a rule these left Charing Cross at the exact minute that the corresponding L.C.D.R. trains left Victoria, and the arrivals at Dover Pier were practically simultaneous. The fastest was the 9 a.m. down which ran *via* Cannon Street (reversal) and covered the 75¼ miles from there to Dover Pier in 101 min. Intermediate stops were less well featured than on the rival route, but the 5.35 p.m. from Charing Cross (for Ostend) called at Cannon Street, Tonbridge, Paddock Wood, Ashford, Sandling Junction, Folkestone Central and Dover Town (now no more), taking 132 min. for the journey. The South Eastern also

had its own route to the continent, *via* Folkestone and Boulogne, with two services in each direction—at 10 a.m. and 2.45 p.m. from Charing Cross, 4.10 and 9.50 p.m. from Folkestone Harbour. The last-mentioned stopped at Tonbridge to detach a portion for Reading and the Great Western line; submarine depths were penetrated to reach Liverpool Central Low Level (Mersey Railway) at 6.29 a.m. Returning thence at 7.57 a.m. (Rock Ferry 8.14, Chester 8.45, Birmingham Snow Hill 11.10, and slipped at

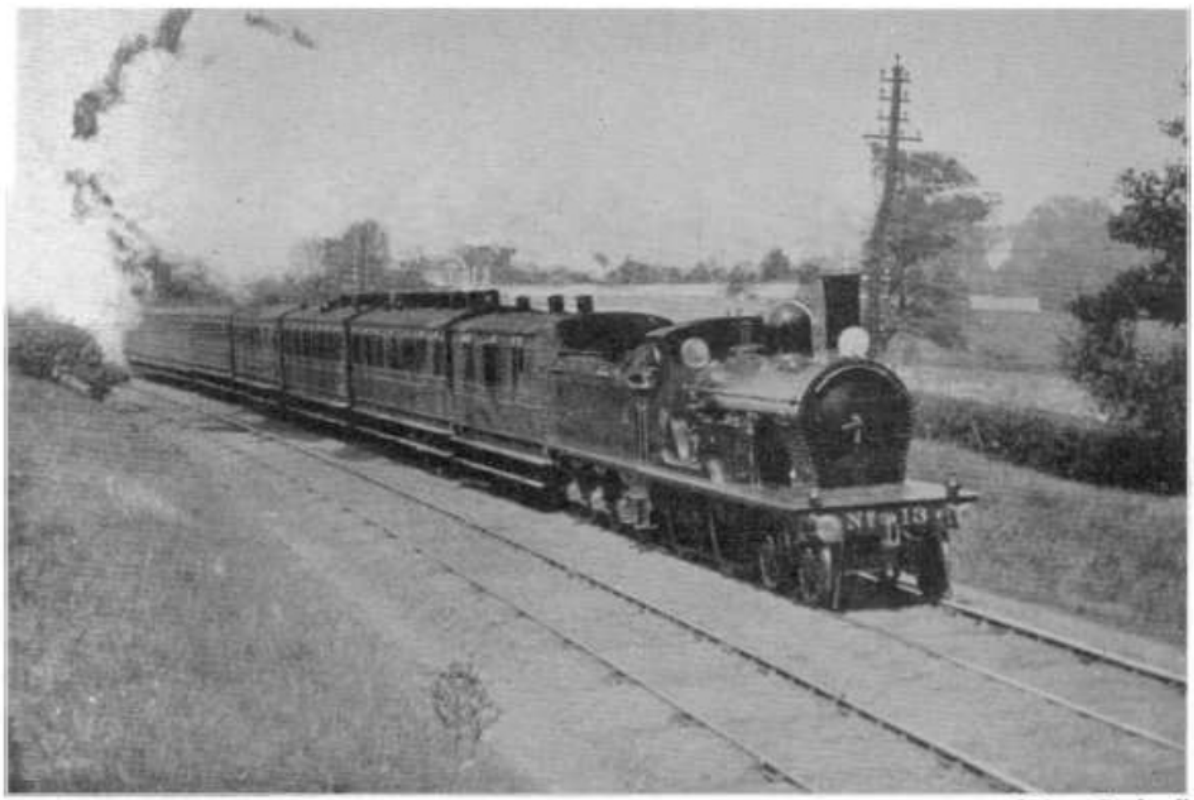

Photo courtesy] [*Rixon Bucknall*

Kirtley 4-4-0 No. 13, built at Longhedge Works, Battersea, in 1896, heading a London, Chatham & Dover Railway boat train near Bickley

Reading at 1.23 p.m.) the through coaches were attached at Tonbridge to the 2.45 from Charing Cross due at Folkestone Harbour at 4.35 p.m.—an unusual example of economical carriage user.

These were the only regular expresses over the South Eastern's Reading line; between Redhill and Reading they called at Ash, but curiously enough not at Guildford. In the summer, however, there was a daily "Express Train to the Sea-side" at 8.40 a.m. from Reading, which on this section called at Wokingham, Ash, Guildford, Dorking and of course at Redhill for reversal. A train from East Croydon at 9.44 a.m., *via* Oxted and the Edenbridge spur, made connection at Tonbridge; specimen seaside arrivals were Hastings 11.50, Folkestone Central 11.50, Ramsgate—*via* Canterbury (now Canterbury West)—12.20 p.m. Overall times in the reverse direction were very similar, departure from Folkestone being at 6.7 p.m. and arrival at Reading 9.18 (127¼ miles).

Reverting to the South Eastern main line (from London to Tonbridge *via* Sevenoaks) we find, apart from the boat trains, six down expresses which covered the 70¾ miles from Charing Cross *via* Cannon Street to Folkestone Central in slightly over two hours with up to seven intermediate stops; the fastest of this group, the 11 a.m., called only at Cannon Street, Ashford, Sandling Junction and Shorncliffe Camp, and was due at Folkestone at 1.1 p.m., and Dover Town at 1.18. In the up direction there was less consistency. The 8.55 a.m. from Folkestone reached Cannon Street in 95 min. non-stop, but this was *hors concours*; most of the other expresses (so-called) took nearly an hour longer. The South Eastern also competed with the L.C.D.R. for the North Kent Coast traffic by running through trains *via* Ashford, Canterbury and Minster Junction to its

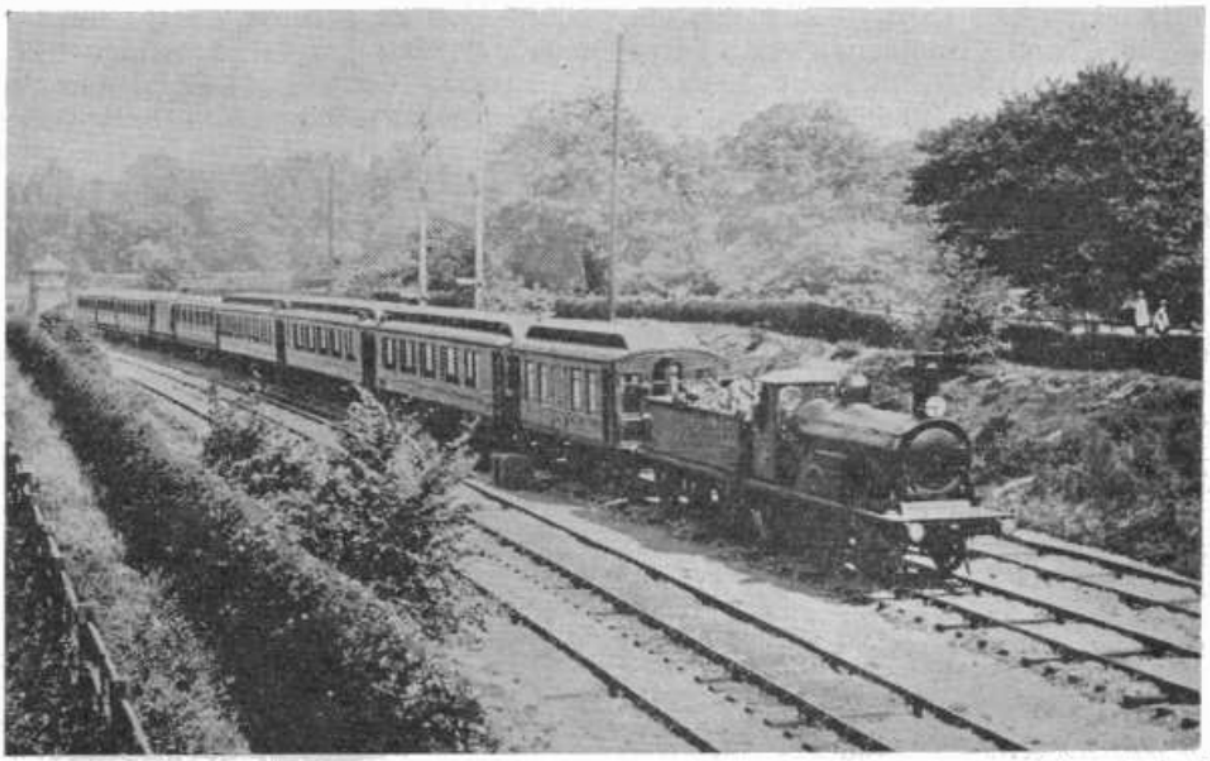

Photo courtesy] [*Rixon Bucknall*

Down Pullman car train, headed by London, Brighton & South Coast Railway 2-2-2 No. 329, "Stephenson," designed by William Stroudley, between Balham and Streatham Common about 1898

own stations at Ramsgate and Margate (which after the subsequent union of the two systems were known as Ramsgate Town and Margate Sands).

Nothing in either direction managed the 85 miles between Cannon Street and Ramsgate in as little as two hours, but two down and four up trains did quite well by local standards with around 130 min. with three or four stops. Deal and Walmer had through carriages *via* Minster Junction, and there was a Sunday parallel to the L.C.D.R.'s 9.2 a.m. from Victoria; the South Eastern train from Charing Cross also left at 9.2 and was 9 min. behind at Deal, the distance being seven miles longer. Hastings, at the end of a long troublesome branch from Tonbridge, did not come off so well. There were eight or nine expresses in each direction, but over this difficult route about two hours was regarded as satisfactory for the journey of 61¼ miles from Cannon Street, although one business train each way covered the distance in 105 min., and the crack 3.45 p.m. down—which ran non-stop to West St. Leonards—in 99. This does not look very thrilling on paper, but to put the matter in perspective it is fair to point out that the fastest of today's diesels takes only 9 min. less.

On balance, the inhabitants of Hastings and St. Leonards were worse served by the South Eastern's neighbour, the London, Brighton & South Coast, over its longer but easier route through Haywards Heath and Lewes. Although Hastings trains used the direct line from Polegate to Stonecross Junction, by-passing Eastbourne, the best time was 123 min. by the 3.27 p.m. from Victoria (76½ miles) and the 5.5 p.m. from London Bridge (76¼). In the up direction there was nothing comparable; indeed the fastest time (132 min.) involved a change at Eastbourne into the 8.30 a.m., which ran the 65¾ miles thence to London Bridge in 90 min. non-stop. Eastbourne had another good up train at 9.55 a.m., which covered the 55¼ miles to East Croydon in 75 min., arrived at London Bridge at 11.27, and conveyed a portion for Victoria due at 11.35. In the down direction honours were shared by the 3.22 p.m. from Victoria (95 min.) and the 5.5 p.m. from London Bridge (93 min.); each called only at Lewes, where the latter detached a Hastings portion.

The schedules of the Newhaven/Dieppe boat trains on the whole were unimpressive, though the 10 a.m. from Victoria was booked from East Croydon to Newhaven Harbour, 46¼ miles, in 65 min. The Lewes-Seaford branch also had

one through express each way over the "Bluebell Line"; the 3 p.m. Seaford to Victoria covered the 40 miles from Lewes to East Croydon in 71 min., calling at Horsted Keynes, East Grinstead and Oxted.

So far as Brighton is concerned, the star turn was the 5 p.m. from London Bridge—50½ miles in 65 min. The corresponding up train, the 8.45 a.m., took 70, but was presumably a stiffer proposition for it carried a Victoria portion that was slipped at East Croydon. The 9.25 and 9.55 a.m. from Brighton, also non-stop to London Bridge, were allowed 73 and 70 min. respectively, while the 2, 4 and 6 p.m. down took 75 or 80 with one or two intermediate stops. Victoria, in those days, occupied rather a back place, and the only daily non-stop train in either direction was the 3.50 p.m. down in 75 min., though the 11.50 p.m. (Thursdays and Saturdays) was booked in 70; in the up direction there was nothing better than 80 min.

Many of these fast Brighton trains were restricted to first and second class—some indeed to first class only; third class passengers, apart from one or two expresses, had to be prepared to spend upwards of an hour and a half over their journey. Worthing had a few direct trains, and others detached through coaches at Haywards Heath or Preston Park. The best time between London Bridge and Worthing, 61 miles, was 95 min. each way. From Victoria the 11.30 a.m. deserves honourable mention; it called at Clapham Junction, East Croydon, Preston Park and Hove, and was due at Worthing at 1.10 p.m.

All the Portsmouth expresses ran *via* Mitcham Junction and Sutton. The 8.45 a.m. Portsmouth Harbour to London Bridge and the 4.55 p.m. return covered the 87¾ miles in 125 min. with three stops; the 6.25 a.m. from London Bridge needed 5 min. longer with four. The best Victoria time was 130 min. by the 11.35 a.m. down and the 9.40 a.m. up. The 3.37 p.m. from Victoria made the longest non-stop run in the south-east—84¼ miles to Fratton—but it took 128 min., 6 min. longer than the 11.35 a.m. with two stops, and 2 min. longer than the 1.40 p.m. with three. Littlehampton had to rest content with semi-fast connections at Arundel or Ford, and though Bognor had a few through trains the overall timings were lamentable. On the other hand there were several trains between Brighton and Portsmouth

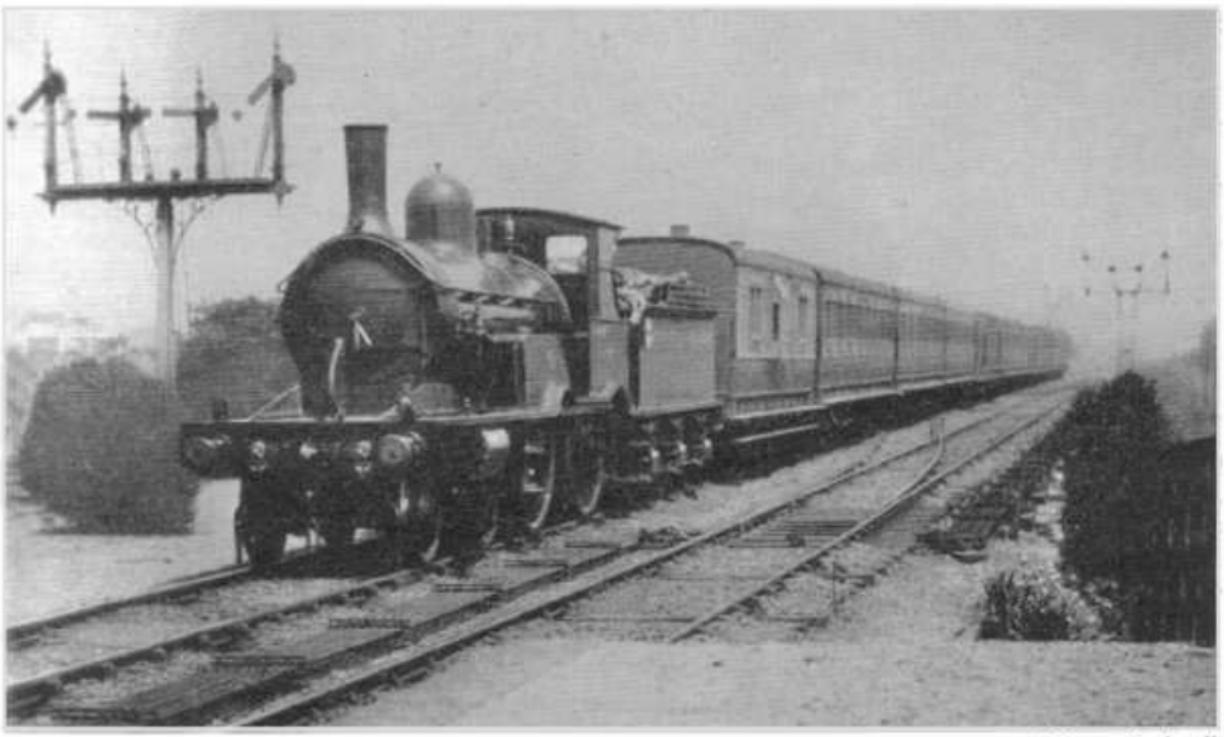

Photo courtesy] [*Rixon Bucknall*

London & South Western Railway down train passing Earlsfield, between Clapham Junction and Wimbledon, in the 1890s, with Adams 4-4-0 No. 474

Harbour which were not quite "all-station." The 9.40 a.m. from Brighton took only 80 min. for the 45½ miles, calling at Hove, Worthing, Chichester, Fratton and Portsmouth Town (now Portsmouth & Southsea); the 6 p.m. from Portsmouth Harbour had 83 min. with an additional stop at Havant.

The explanation of L.B.S.C.R. concentration on Portsmouth, to the detriment of Littlehampton, Bognor and certain intermediate stations, was competition from the London & South Western. Over its more heavily-graded but much shorter route from Waterloo (74½ miles *via* Woking and Guildford, 74¼ *via* Claygate and Guildford) the L.S.W.R. could manage only one down train (the 3.40 p.m.) and two up (the 2.45 and 5.40 p.m.) in the L.B.S.C.R.'s best London Bridge time of 125 min. These used the Claygate line; so did the 9 a.m. and 12.10 p.m. down—132 and 126 min. On the other hand the 9.35 a.m. and 12 noon from Portsmouth Harbour (131 and 135) and the 5 p.m. from Waterloo (127) ran *via* Woking. All these trains made from four to eight stops, and the 5.40 p.m. up was quite snappily timed, being allowed only 32 min. for the 24½ miles from Petersfield to Guildford and 39 for the 29¼ from Guildford to Vauxhall *via* Claygate. One or two on Sundays did nearly as well.

On the direct Southampton line *via* Basingstoke the Channel Islands boat trains (nine each way a week in the summer) averaged about 46 m.p.h., but travellers to Southampton itself had little cause for enthusiasm. Admittedly, the 12.30 p.m. from Waterloo reached Southampton West (now Southampton Central), 79¼ miles, in 104 min. non-stop and the 4.55 p.m.—which called at Basingstoke and slipped at Winchester—in 109, but only three other trains took less than 2½ hours. In the up direction, despite an invariable stop at Vauxhall for ticket collection, the picture was not so depressing. The 8.48 a.m. calling at Winchester, Woking and Vauxhall, needed only 111 min., the 2.58 p.m. ran non-stop to Vauxhall in 101, and six other trains completed the journey to Waterloo in under 2¼ hours. Bournemouth East (now Bournemouth Central) had one down train, the 2.15 p.m., in 143 min. with a single stop at Christchurch, and the 2.5 p.m. up made the longest non-stop run on L.S.W.R. metals (106¾ miles) to reach Vauxhall in 132 min. (Waterloo in 140); two others in each direction on weekdays and one on Sundays were allowed around 160 min.

Some Bournemouth trains served Weymouth, and there were independent Weymouth trains over the slightly shorter route from Brockenhurst to Hamworthy Junction *via* Wimborne. These included the 10.5 a.m. up and the 2.25 p.m. down, which, however, took more than four hours for the 142½ miles with eleven or twelve intermediate stops. The fastest Weymouth times were made *via* Bournemouth—3 hr. 40 min. by the 12.45 p.m. up, 3 hr. 45 min. by the 4.55 p.m. down and 3 hr. 49 min. by the 6.50 a.m. up.

Between Portsmouth, Fareham and Southampton there were no expresses in the accepted sense of the term, but the 8.15 a.m. and 5 p.m. from Portsmouth Town were extended to Salisbury and thence over the Great Western to Cardiff. In the reverse direction Portsmouth trains left Cardiff at 10.15 a.m. and 4.23 p.m.; the latter ran from Salisbury to Southampton West, 24¾ miles, in 36 min., being due there at 8.1. Southampton was also served by through trains over the Midland & South Western Junction Railway *via* Andover Junction, including a weekly "American and Cape Lines Express"; the fastest time between Cheltenham and Southampton West, 94½ miles, was 168 min. with eight intermediate stops.

On the L.S.W.R.'s West of England main line we meet for the first time in this review a service-pattern which has remained basically unchanged since 1898; daytime departures from Waterloo were at 9.15, 11, 11.5 (summer only), 1, 3 and 5.50. The crack train was not, as today, the 11 a.m., but the 3 p.m., which reached Exeter Queen Street (now Exeter Central), 171¾ miles, in 3 hr. 46 min. with a 9-min. stop at Salisbury and a momentary stop at Sherborne (which gave an all-stations connection forward). The remainder took little over four hours, and the 5.50 p.m. did particularly well with 4 hr. 6 min. including eight intermediate stops. (The present 6 p.m. takes 3 hr. 59 min. with nine stops.) In the up direction departures from Exeter were 7.45 and 10.25 a.m., 12.45, 1 (summer only), 4.15 and 6 p.m. Speeds were commendable; 98 min. for the 82½

miles from Salisbury to Vauxhall was better than anything on the Southampton line, and there were some very sharp point-to-point timings over the more steeply graded sections—45 min. for the 36¾ miles from Sidmouth Junction to Yeovil Junction, for instance.

The expresses which stopped at Templecombe had good connections over the Somerset & Dorset Joint line, but its main interest lay in the through services to and from the Midland Railway *via* Bath Queen Square (now Bath Green Park). During the summer months there were four in each direction, and the best time of 130 min. for the extraordinarily trying 71½ miles from Bournemouth West to Bath with eight stops does not look at all shabby by 1961 standards. The activities of the L.S.W.R. west of Exeter do not require detailed comment, but the fastest time from Queen Street to Plymouth North Road (58¼ miles) was a meritorious 98 min. with four stops, and the forerunner of the "Atlantic Coast Express" covered the 39¾ miles between Queen Street and Barnstaple Junction, with two stops, in 70 min. down and 72 min. up.

While it is clear that some of the locomotive performance, particularly over hilly sections, was by no means despicable, it must be admitted that in 1898 the independent systems which now comprise the Southern Region of British Railways lagged behind the Great Western and some of the northern lines, where average speeds of 50 m.p.h. were commonplace, even over such difficult routes as Preston to Carlisle. Nor was there as yet any comparable progress in the provision of passenger amenities. It is true that the L.B.S.C.R. attached Pullman cars to many of its expresses and the L.S.W.R. to a few, but corridor and restaurant car facilities, already in evidence elsewhere, were unknown south of the Thames, where the sale of railway sandwiches must have been enormous.